

Part 2

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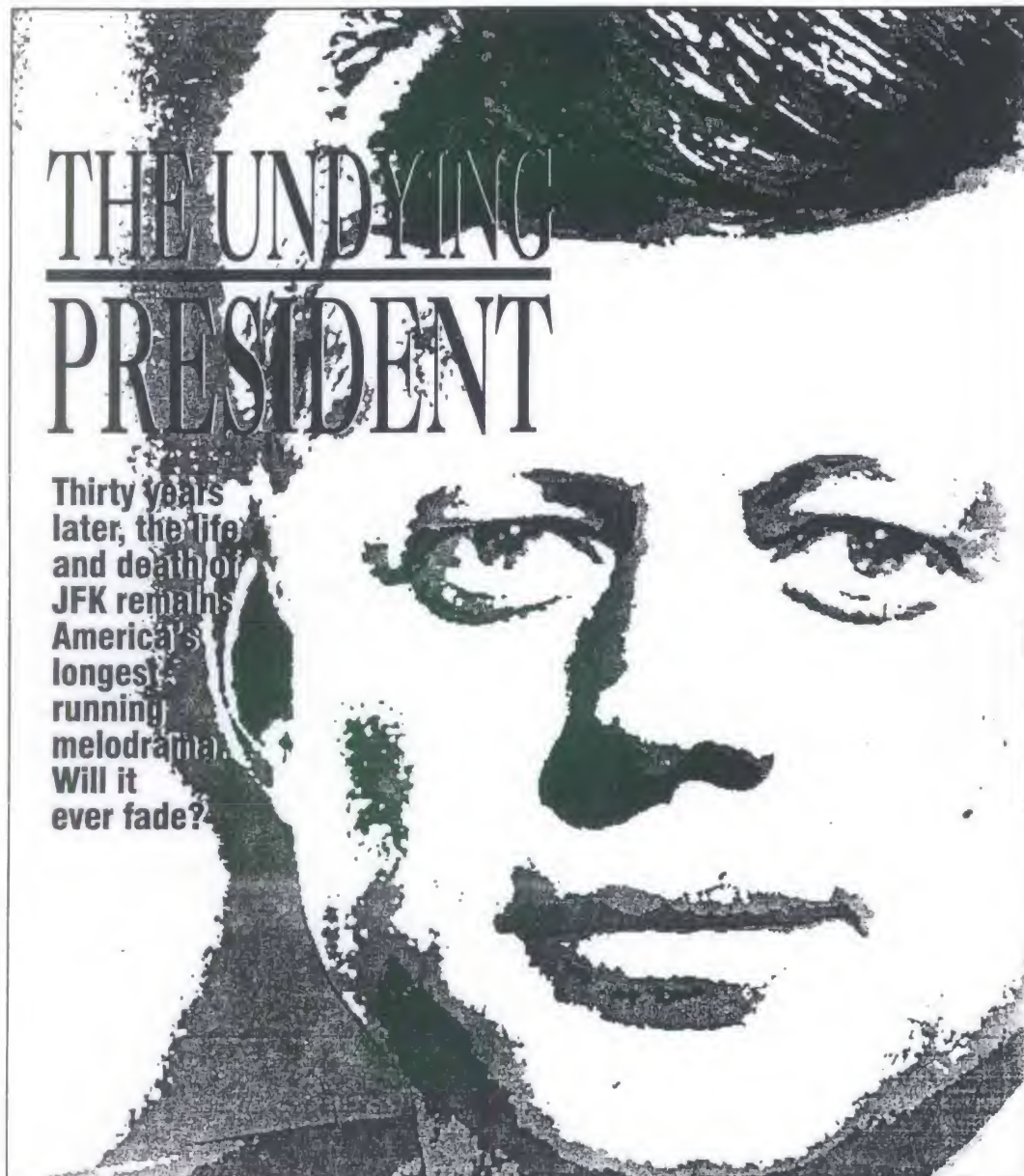
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PART 2

THE UNDYING PRESIDENT

Thirty years later, the life and death of JFK remains America's longest-running melodrama. Will it ever fade?



FOR RUGGED individualists, Americans are an oddly sentimental lot — crazy for golden oldies and reruns of "Lucy," and, 30 years after his death, devoted to the memory of a winsome young president ambushed in Dallas, pretty wife at his side. How long will John F. Kennedy arrest the national imagination? Better start ordering those 50-year commemoratives now.

The Kennedy saga remains the nation's longest running melodrama — a splashy but soulful production elaborately restaged at five-year intervals. Some members of the MTV generation may dismiss these anniversary blowouts as dopey and boring and wonder why baby boomers just don't get on with their lives. But there are plenty like 29-year-old Deroy Murdock, a Manhattan writer and marketing consultant, who finds John Kennedy a compelling historical figure and says most of his contemporaries feel the same. "I don't sense an exhaustion with the story at all," he says.

The force field surrounding JFK's memory tugs most powerfully at Americans who recall Nov. 22, 1963 — those who shared what Wesleyan University historian William Manchester says is "the greatest simultaneous experience this people or anyone else ever had." Television coverage of Kennedy's death in Dallas, and the subsequent murder of Lee Harvey Oswald by nightclub operator Jack Ruby, drew the American nation together with a swiftness that even media swami Marshall McLuhan might not have anticipated. In shock and apprehension, Americans sat in front of their sets and watched and watched and watched. At every opportunity, they still do.



AP Photo

Little that has crossed TV screens since can match those stunning two-tone images from Dallas — the sudden lurch of the presidential motorcade, the solemn announcement at Parkland Hospital, the slow-motion repeats of Jack Ruby stepping from a crowd, the look of agony and disbelief on the mortally wounded Lee Oswald — nor, for drama surpassing most mini-series, the melancholy conclusion of the story in Washington.

The funeral cortège, the riderless horse, the lines of mourners, the widow in black, the adorable children. A brave salute by 3-year-old John F. Kennedy Jr. and the heartbreaking pageant was complete. Whatever their political sentiments, Americans seemed paralyzed by the spectacle — first by the horrifying incident itself, and then by their astonishing access as first-row observers.

No wonder many feel that the media sustain Jack Kennedy in death as it elevated him in life. "It's keeping the assassination in the public's face, so to speak," says Lisa Butler, a visiting scholar in the psychology department at Stanford University.

Those first dramatic network feeds from Dallas and Washington and, later, Abraham Zapruder's famous home-movie footage served as booster rockets that launched the American news establishment into journalistic outer space. Through the years there have been Kennedy investigations and exposés of every variety as wannabe assassinations sleuths scrambled for scoops and counter-scoops. Much of the stuff was shoddy and exploitative, but some of this year's offerings — like last week's PBS "Frontline" report on Oswald, the CBS broadcast "Who Killed JFK?" and Gerald Posner's revelatory book, "Case Closed" — contributed appreciably to the body of usable knowledge. Too often, though, style overcame substance in JFK reporting.

"It's the Kennedy glamor," says Mary Perot Nichols, who teaches a course on the assassination at the New York University School of Continuing Education. "The

THE KENNEDY COMPLEX

Will we always be gripped by JFK, Dallas and all the symbolism of that time and place? See you at the 35th.

media made Camelot the biggest fairy tale we have."

Without the relentless hyper-coverage and access to archival TV treasures, would the American passion for Kennedy still burn after three decades? Would 200,000 admirers a year troop through the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston? Would there be a tidal wave of television specials and a half dozen new JFK books? Would there be conferences at Harvard and in Dallas, splashy magazine covers and



UPI Photo

front-page newspaper stories across the country?

"The mere fact that we have all this [broadcast] tape is terribly, terribly important," said Michael Kammen, professor of American history and culture at Cornell University and author of "Mystic Chords of Memory," a book dealing with national identity. "That it can be replayed in hundreds of ways means people not alive in 1963 can almost feel they were. All adults remember exactly where they were when Kennedy was shot, but younger people too can vicariously share that feeling."

But media is not the only answer. The memorializing of Jack Kennedy is a complex cultural exercise — a remarkable common undertaking that embraces the significant and the sleazy, that reveals the national preoccupation with youth and glamor, that piques America's appetite for mystery and intrigue. It is an often baffling phenomenon that draws on political passion and lost idealism and suggests that many Americans keep time with stopwatches that began ticking in Dallas. For those who loved Kennedy most, there is a discouraging sense that the world has changed and that things will never be the same again. Should the faithful let go of Kennedy at last? "It's evasive," said John Morton Blum, Sterling professor emeritus of history at Yale University. "By focusing on a sentimentalized version of the past, those who do so avoid the realities of the present."

But for many, letting go of Kennedy would be to abandon themselves. Some Americans never recovered from his murder, and perhaps never will.

"It was a dreadful shock to the culture and its long-standing values," said Blum. "Kennedy represented two qualities Americans hold dear — youth and hope. I'm talking about Kennedy as a symbol, an emblem. I'm talking about what the Kennedy people thought they saw and thought was assassinated."

Suffering from chronic physical ailments and reconciled long before to the limits of pragmatic politics, Jack Kennedy almost surely did not serve as a symbol of unqualified optimism for himself. Far more than his ardent supporters, Kennedy knew there would be compromises and failures and days of despair. But the public saw him differently — young, indomitable, certain to succeed. Whatever self-doubts beset JFK, the emblematic aspects of his personality — the vigor, daring and high-mindedness he represented — may explain best why the Kennedy story remains so fresh and compelling.

"It was the young king struck down and all that might have been," said Richard Reeves, author of the highly praised new assessment, "President Kennedy: Profile of Power." "Kennedy is associated with a time of change, a time when people sensed we were moving. As a cultural figure, he taught Americans how to be Americans. Watching Kennedy was a lesson in self-improvement."

Reeves said the Kennedy legend has proven a movable feast. Americans who were very young at the time of the president's killing — or not yet born — seem drawn to the story not only because of TV specials and controversial films like Oliver Stone's "JFK," but because the event had such a profound

By John Jeansson
STAFF CORRESPONDENT

DALLAS

YOU GO to Dealey Plaza and look up at the sixth floor of the orange-brick Texas School Book Depository, and that corner window is still ajar. There is a permanent exhibition there now — "The Sixth Floor," it's called — which track lighting has made bright and airy, no longer the shadowy, cluttered space police searched within minutes of the deed. But you don't enter lightly.

You don't explore an inch of the place without sitting again at the feet of the hauntingly familiar. You don't pass a photo, a TV monitor, a display, a chart, a map, without realizing that you are making your way toward that corner window, that front-row seat to national shock and dismay.

"Did he have a scope?" one man asks the museum guide. The so-called "sniper's perch" has been recreated with cardboard boxes stacked at the corner window, and walled off by plexiglass. But you can look out the next window, and you can see, in your head, the presidential motorcade creeping directly toward you, up Houston Street, before it slows to take a sharp left turn below you, onto Elm, between Dealey Plaza and the grassy knoll. Only 265 feet away.

"Yes," the guide confirms; he had a scope. "Piece of cake."

You are not alone. Every day 1,000 people pass through here, more than 1.5 million since the local historical foundation opened the exhibition in February, 1989. In the rest of the Texas School Book Depository — actually, the Dallas County Administration Building now — government workers come and go in their 1993 lives. But, in "The Sixth

THE VIEW FROM A SIXTH-FLOOR WINDOW



A young family visits Dallas' Texas School Book Depository sixth-floor museum; the assassin's window is at left.

Floor," for \$4, you are locked in a defining moment in American history — videotapes and film and still photographs and old newspaper clippings and displays, even a quick pencil draft of the originally planned front page of the Dallas Times Herald's afternoon edition: Kennedy smiling and waving along the motorcade, with a proposed headline de-

claring that he "Takes Dallas By Storm."

Other visitors to "The Sixth Floor" — strangers, unprompted — tell you where they were that day. And then you learn, from the guest book as you exit the 9,000-square-foot warehouse-turned-museum, that it really has been 30 years. Not everybody was somewhere on Nov. 22, 1963.

"I was not born yet," a 13-year-old has written in the guest book, "but I studied about it in school, and I even cried when I got to the part of his death."

"It was real cool. And sad," someone else has written.

"Beavis and Butt-head rule!" another has written.

So it's history now. To a new generation it's a dry page in a textbook. It's a souvenir, on sale in "The Sixth Floor" gift shop: a postcard, a pencil, a replica of the Nov. 23, 1963, New York Herald Tribune. Then 10 cents, now \$3.50. Ancient history. Among "The Sixth Floor" displays, meant to provide a time fix, are old 45-rpm records, which will take some explaining to the CD generation. The purpose of the exhibition is explained by its quote of JFK himself: "History, after all, is the memory of a nation." "The Sixth Floor" works hard at holding that memory, in all its stupefying, painful, cynical shapes, so that at times along the tour — further aided by personal audiotapes (\$2 extra) — the crowds become quiet.

Outside, a 1980 plaque on the Texas School Book Depository wall records that, here, "Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly shot and killed President John F. Kennedy" — and someone has underlined "allegedly" by scratching the plaque's black surface silver. "It's a beautiful telling of the perfect lie," someone has written in the guest book. And an-

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effect on their parents' generation.

Visiting the University of Texas in Austin, Reeves met a graduate student in her early 30s who admitted she knew little about Kennedy's presidency but found JFK an irresistible figure, nonetheless. Though only a toddler when Kennedy was killed, the student told Reeves she remembers vividly the impact of the news at her home. "All the adults were crying," Reeves said. "She had never seen anything like that."

Murdered at 46, Kennedy became the sort of tragic figure embraced as readily by young people as their elders. "This is the rape that touched us all," said poet Nikki Giovanni, a professor of English at Virginia Polytechnic and State University and author of the forthcoming book of essays "Racism 101." "We felt this. It's not going to be forgotten." Kennedy's egalitarian rhetoric — and White House backing for the Civil Rights Bill of 1963 — earned him respect in the black community that may have been unmatched since Lincoln. "Under his watch, you had movement toward the country when he said, 'Let America be America to me,'" said Giovanni, who is black. By the time the rights bill passed, John Kennedy was dead and Lyndon Johnson occupied the Oval Office.

In history, literature and pop culture, death at an early age is a recurring theme, and an alluring one. Joan of Arc, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Romeo and Juliet died too soon, and so did James Dean, Buddy Holly and John Lennon. But the murder of a political leader can be especially wrenching for a nation accustomed to domestic

peace and stability — even more so if the leader is charming and clever, if his speeches ring with promise and purpose, if his gestures seem assured and his manner resolute. After Dwight Eisenhower's placid paternalism, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was a revelation. Suddenly there was a sizzle in the American circuit — an excitement that hinted at a splendid future. The country was heading for greatness, people thought. Kennedy, too.

"The memory of Kennedy is intense after thirty years, because he was cut down in his prime," says author and Oscar-winning filmmaker Peter Davis, who with his son Nick co-produced the documentary "Jack," broadcast last week on CBS. "His youth in a funny way was spared, though his life wasn't. He remains forever young." Adds Nick Davis, who at 28 is half his father's age: "Even Elvis got old and fat."

But poor Elvis Presley proved his own assassin. John Kennedy did not slurp highballs of barbiturates and beer nor pig out on peanut butter and bananas. Rumored White House trays may ultimately have



Dallas Times Herald / Bob Jackson



The Kennedy Complex

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jeopardized his marriage and political future but not his life. If murder were subtracted from the Kennedy saga, how profoundly would his memory be altered?

"In the long reach of history," said William Manchester, "a leader who is slain — particularly a young leader — is transformed. Kennedy became a martyr. After the assassination, he wasn't the same person at all." Just as the public embraced Kennedy more enthusiastically after his death, Americans overhauled their assessment of Abraham Lincoln following his assassination in 1865, said Manchester, whose 1967 book, "The Death of a President," was one of the earliest volumes to examine JFK's murder. "He was a cold, aloof genius," said Manchester of Lincoln, "but you wouldn't know that today."

Two other American presidents were killed in office — James Garfield (1881) and William McKinley (1901), but little mystery attended their deaths. A fellow denied an overseas appointment shot Garfield, and McKinley was murdered by an anarchist in Buffalo. Lincoln's murder was discussed emotionally for decades, historians say, because conspiracy theorists insisted John Wilkes Booth could not have acted alone. But in three decades, the killing of John F. Kennedy has vaulted into a class by itself.

A recent poll by CBS News showed that 90 percent of Americans still believe Lee Harvey Oswald was part of a conspiracy — and what a variety of plots the American people think possible. The CIA, the Mafia, Cuban exiles, Fidel Castro, shadowy operatives of the military-industrial complex — even Lyndon Baines Johnson, who became president upon Kennedy's death — have been fingered as Oswald's potential accomplices.

Despite the findings of the Warren Commission in 1964 and the arguments of a variety of academic researchers and independent investigators like attorney Gerald Posner, Americans cling to the notion that Kennedy's murder is an unsolved mystery. But Cornell's Michael

Kammen says cabals and political paranoia are familiar components of national mindset — reminders of the country's European origins. "It is very much part of our Anglo-American political and ideological heritage," says Kammen. "During the Seventeenth Century in England, there were rumors of conspiracies all the time, and belief in conspiracies became part of the political culture." In the case of the Kennedy murder, Americans who back conspiracy theories actually may be trying to end idle speculation by finding what they consider the ultimate answer to the riddle — to at least glimpse the hand that clutched the smoking gun. "The assassination was a frightening, overwhelming event," said Lisa Butler of Stanford, who with two other psychologists studied audience reaction to the "JFK" film. "People need closure."

Whatever the merit of the various JFK murder scenarios or the motivation of Americans who embrace them, the whiff of mystery continues to excite the communal consciousness. The problem — at least from the viewpoint of historians — is that assassination enthusiasts are apt to know more about Kennedy conspiracies than about Kennedy.

"You can go to any classroom in America and find that students have never heard of the Alliance for Progress, or Kennedy's Atlantic partnership free-trade proposal, or the nuclear test-ban treaty of 1963 or even the Berlin crisis of 1961," said Douglas Brinkley, a Hofstra University historian who currently serves as visiting associate director of the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans. "But everyone knows stories about who killed John F. Kennedy. There is no subject students in history classes would like to discuss as museum more than the Kennedy assassination."

Unless Americans change their focus, says John Morton Blum of Yale, there is a danger the historical significance of Kennedy will be obscured by rumors, innuendo and whodunit theories. "In twenty-five years we will have all myth and little reality," he says.

Maybe that is what Americans wanted from Kennedy all along. ■

The View From the 6th Floor

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other: "I guess no one will ever know . . ."

And another: "Get over it! Oswald did it!"

And another: "I'm sad all over again."

Included among the exhibits is a strip of yellowed United Press International teletype paper that perfectly catches the jumble of 30 years ago, when UPI frantically tried to spread the impossible news:

BULLETIN
(DALLAS) — AN UNKNOWN
SNIPER FIRED THREE SHOTS AT PTOU
FLASH
KENNEDY
OOTASP
KENNEDY SERIOUSLY WOUNDED
STAY OFF ALL OF YOU STAY OFF
AND KEEP OFF GET OFF

In 30 years, an entirely new Dallas skyline has appeared to the east of Dealey Plaza. But somewhere out there is Love Field, and Oswald's boarding house, and the Texas Theater where Oswald was arrested. You can see it all. In your rental car you can drive from the School Book Depository, past the grassy knoll, under the triple overpass, northwest on the Stemmons Freeway, and it will take only four minutes to arrive at the emergency entrance of

Parkland Memorial Hospital.

On the hospital's first floor, there is a bronze plaque replicating the memo sent to the hospital staff on Nov. 27, 1963, noting that, in a surreal 48 hours the hospital dealt with the dying Kennedy, seriously wounded Texas Gov. John Connally and the dying Oswald, while the stunned world watched. "Our pride," hospital administrator C.J. Price wrote to his employees, "is not that we were swept up by the whirlwind of tragic history, but that when we were, we were not found wanting."

Drive your rental car back downtown, and a police officer will be happy to show you the basement garage of the Municipal Building, where Oswald was shot. Senior Cpl. Sandra Ortega de King, like some conscientious real estate broker, positions Oswald, Ruby, reporters, then asks: "Is there anything else you would like to see? The cell, maybe?" And she will take you — not on the elevator Oswald used; it's too unsafe and rarely used — up to the old city jail, used only as storage space since 1984, and give you a look at the fifth-floor cell where first Oswald, then Ruby, was confined.

Police from around the world come to see these, Ortega says. And classes of schoolchildren. And just people on vacation, passing through Dallas, vaguely wondering why everything is so terribly familiar. ■

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